

Racism Embedded in Israeli School Textbooks

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A new report on Palestinian and Israeli school books has elicited much debate ([“Israel shoots back: ‘Look beyond the textbooks,’”](#) *The Times of Israel*, 6 February).

The report — by academics in [Tel Aviv](#), [Bethlehem](#) and the American university [Yale](#) — is short. Yet it raises some poignant questions ([“Victims of our own narratives? Portrayal of the other in Israeli and Palestinian school books,”](#) Council of Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, 4 February [PDF]).

Israeli educators who hastened to pronounce it biased were quite right. Such a study cannot be symmetrical, for it examines two education systems, one of which is entirely subjugated to the other. A reminder of this situation is found in the introduction of the report. It notes that the Wye River Memorandum — signed between Israel and the [Palestinian Authority](#) in 1998 — included an “explicit statement about incitement.”

The agreement states that “the Palestinian side would issue a decree prohibiting all forms of [incitement](#) to violence or terror, and establishing mechanisms for acting systematically against all expressions or threats of violence or terror. This decree would be comparable to the existing Israeli legislation which deals with the same subject.”

No such caution is mentioned with regard to the Israeli regime of occupation, even though Israel is regularly taken to task by the United Nations for its aggressive behavior.

As textbook researcher Samira Alayan from the Georg Eckert Institute for the Study of Textbooks has shown, Palestinian textbooks are severely controlled and censored not only by Israel but also by European and American bodies that finance their production (see an abstract of the book: [“Images of identity: Self and other in school text books of the Palestinian Authority,”](#) June 2011 [PDF]).

Objective?

Nevertheless, the new report prides itself for having engaged “objective” evaluators who come from the US and Europe, although the US denies tourist visas to most Palestinians — including the ambassador of the PA to the [European Union](#), [Leila Shahid](#), who was not allowed to attend the [New York](#) session of the [Russell Tribunal on Palestine](#) in October last year — and many European states and companies profit from the occupation of Palestine. Why not recruit evaluators from [Pakistan](#) or [South Africa](#)?

The report relies on content analysis but neglects the ways in which the content — both visual and written — is used to persuade readers of its ideological message. For instance, it praises Israeli textbooks for relating the details of massacres but does not discuss how these

books try to legitimize the massacres as part of the “big picture” — to Israel’s benefit.

One Israeli textbook, we are told, acknowledges that most of the Palestinians killed by Zionist forces in the village of [Deir Yassin](#), near [Jerusalem](#), in 1948 were women, children or elderly. Yet the book cites claims that the victims died because they refused to leave their homes and that the massacre “still serves as an excuse for Arab propaganda against Israel.”

This excuse bears a chilling similarity to the one used by Israel when it [subjected Gaza to a three-week bombing campaign](#) in late 2008 and early 2009. And this excuse is not confined to one work. The 2009 book *Israeli Nationalism and Nation: Building a State in the Middle East* — by Eyal Naveh, Naomi Vered and David Shahar — stated that the residents of Deir Yassin failed to evacuate their village because the loud-speaker from which they were supposed to receive a warning was not functioning properly.

Taboo of occupation

Two main categories are missing from the analysis: occupation and racist discourse. Perhaps that is why describing the dire facts of the occupation seemed to involve “negative characterization of Israelis” to the researchers.

Israeli school books do not address the occupation because their message is that there is no occupation. They inculcate what sociologist Stanley Cohen — in his 2002 book *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering* — termed the “Zionist kitsch” about the eternal historical rights of the Jews on the whole land of Israel and Palestine. This explains why the researchers behind this study were offended by how Palestinians use the term “colonialism” to describe Zionist settlement on their land. In Israeli mainstream books, [illegal settlements](#) like [Ariel](#) or Alon Shvut are presented as no different to Tel Aviv.

The green line — the 1949 armistice line separating Israel from the territories captured in 1967 — is never shown or discussed. The only Israeli geography book I found that discusses the issue of the green line is *Sfat Hamapa (The language of maps)* by P. Dina (published in 1996).

In Israeli textbooks, the cruel practices of occupation such as [administrative detention, military checkpoints](#) and [house demolitions](#) are presented as necessities in our “defensive democracy.”

Since racist “teaching tools” of a visual or verbal nature are not part of the analysis presented in this study, racist Israeli representations of Palestinians are reported to be “neutral.” Since Palestinians are never presented in Israeli textbooks as persons like us — modern professionals — only as negative stereotypes of terrorists, nomads and primitive farmers, one must conclude that these racist representations seemed “neutral” to the researchers and to the “objective” western evaluators.

Better times?

The report concludes that the books on both sides fail to relate the “better times” when there were good relationships between Arabs and Israelis. This must refer either to the good relationships between Jews and Muslims in [Morocco](#), [Tunisia](#) and [Iraq](#), prior to the “redemption” of [Zionism](#) — a reality Zionist education in Israel has always done its utmost to conceal — or to the years between 1967 and 1987 when oppression of Palestinians was considered by Israelis to involve an “enlightened occupation.” I found one reminder of that

“idyllic” time in a geography book published a decade ago but still used — *Israel: The Man and The Space* by Zvia Fine, Meira Segev and Raheli Lavi: “Some of the foreign workers are Palestinians who come from the areas controlled by the Palestinian authorities. They are employed in unprofessional jobs and their wages are lower than that those of the Israeli citizens who work in the same jobs ... This is characteristic of all developed countries.”

The conclusions of the new study reflect the Israeli *bon ton* that brought the success of [Yair Lapid](#) in the recent elections — to wrap up Arabs and Orthodox Jews together and slander them. But, as usual, there can be no comparison.

While Orthodox Jewish textbooks present Arabs — all of them — as evil forces, a sort of biblical Amalek we must eliminate with the help of God, Palestinian textbooks never resort to such discourse. They respect [Judaism](#) as one of the three monotheistic religions but relate — as accurately as they can under so much censorship — the true and horrid facts of life under Israeli military rule.

The new study — or at least the part that has been published — seems quite problematic and biased but not in the way Israel is trying to spin it. Let’s hope the full study, when published, will clear up some of this confusion.

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